

Early Childhood Resilience Toolkit

Created by:
Sara Langworthy, PhD
&

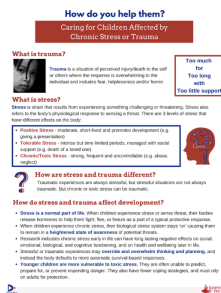
Tracy Schreifels MS., LMFT, IMH-E (III)

We designed the Early Childhood Resilience Toolkit for you to use individually, or with a small group of colleagues. It gives you an opportunity to reflect on how to use relationship-based therapeutic techniques to respond to some of the most common challenging behaviors exhibited by children experiencing trauma - acting out; shutting down; defiance.

How do you use the toolkit?

We designed the Early Childhood Resilience Toolkit for you to use individually, or with a small group of colleagues. It gives you an opportunity to reflect on how to use relationship-based therapeutic techniques to respond to some of the most common challenging behaviors exhibited by children experiencing trauma - Acting Out; Shutting Down; Defiance. We recommend breaking this into three parts, but use this toolkit in whatever way is most useful to you.

Part 1 - Learn



Learn: We encourage you to begin by reviewing the *What is Trauma?* and *What is resilience?* handouts for a basic understanding of the concepts of trauma and resilience. Then, to see how the story of Harry Potter helps us understand resilience, watch the video *Harry Potter and the Ordinary Magic of Resilience*. Follow up with the *Discussion Questions* on trauma and resilience to deepen your learning.

Part 2 - Observe & Reflect

Observe: Choose one of the three behaviors - *Acting Out*, *Shutting Down*, or *Defiance* and watch the video. In each video, you'll see a child engaging in a challenging behavior, and an adult respond to the behavior in the moment using a relationship-based therapeutic technique. The adult then reflects on what they might try differently next time to better meet the child's needs.



Reflect: After watching each video, use the *Discussion Questions* handout on the behavior to guide a reflective conversation. Use the corresponding *Strategies for Behaviors* handout and discuss using the recommended strategies in your work.

Part 3 - Practice & Apply



Practice: Use the *Roleplay Scenarios* handout to discuss or act out examples of challenging behaviors and apply what you've learned about relationship-based therapeutic techniques from the videos and discussions to guide how you would respond in a particular situation.

Apply: Think about a child from your own experience and how you might use these therapeutic strategies to promote resilience. Remember that being therapeutic in our relationships with children and families isn't the same as providing therapy. Being therapeutic gives children the opportunity to experience relationships in a way that promotes healing and resilience!

What is Trauma?

Caring for children experiencing trauma and stress

What is trauma?



Trauma is a situation of perceived injury/death to the self or others where the response is overwhelming to the individual and includes fear, helplessness and/or horror.

Too much
for
Too long
with
Too little support

What is stress?

Stress is strain that results from experiencing something challenging or threatening. Stress also refers to the body's physiological response to sensing a threat. There are 3 levels of stress that have different effects on the body:

- **Positive Stress** - moderate, short-lived and promotes development (e.g. giving a presentation)
- **Tolerable Stress** - intense but time-limited periods, managed with social support (e.g. death of a loved one)
- **Chronic/Toxic Stress** - strong, frequent and uncontrollable (e.g. abuse, neglect)



How are stress and trauma different?

Traumatic experiences are always stressful, but stressful situations are not always traumatic. However, chronic or toxic stress can be traumatic.

How do stress and trauma affect development?

- **Stress is a normal part of life.** When children experience stress or sense threat, their bodies release hormones to help them fight, flee, or freeze as a part of a typical protective response.
- When children experience chronic stress, their biological stress system stays 'on' causing them to remain in a **heightened state of awareness** of potential threats.
- Research indicates chronic stress early in life can have long-lasting negative effects on social, emotional, biological, and cognitive functioning, and on health and well-being later in life.
- Stressful or traumatic experiences may **override and overwhelm thinking and planning**, and instead the body defaults to more automatic survival-based responses.
- **Younger children are more vulnerable to toxic stress.** They are often unable to predict, prepare for, or prevent impending danger. They also have fewer coping strategies and must rely on adults for protection.

What is trauma?

Caring for children experiencing trauma and stress

How can adults help?

We don't need to know what the stress or trauma is to be helpful. We just need to know what it looks like in children's behaviors.

Changing Our Thinking

Traditional Perspective

- What is WRONG with them?
- This child is oppositional, defiant and manipulative.
- This child is using their behaviors to try to control everyone around them.

Trauma - Informed Perspective

- What HAPPENED to them?
- This child is in a highly stressed state of fear.
- These behaviors are the child's attempt to reduce fear and feel more in control.



Children experiencing trauma or toxic stress are not trying to be malicious.

When they feel overwhelmed, they are trying to regain control as a basic survival instinct.

What strategies can adults use?

Comfort
Connect
Collaborate



- **Connection before correction.**
- Establish respectful and trusting relationships with the child's family.
- Help children know what to expect with **structured and predictable environments**.
- Model and encourage positive social interactions.
- Recognize that when children act disruptive, they are showing you they feel out of control.
- **Incorporate family's culture** into your work with the child.
- Actively teach and **model healthy coping strategies**.
- Help children (and families) name their emotions.
- Recognize and help address family's stress.

What is resilience?

Fostering the 'ordinary magic' of resilience

What is resilience?



Resilience is the capacity to 'bounce back', recover, and adapt in the face of hardship, stress, or adverse experiences.



Resilience comes from common and ordinary experiences!

Why is it 'ordinary magic'?

Resilience is not a rare or extraordinary characteristic that some people have and other people don't. Resilience comes from common and ordinary experiences.

What are protective factors?

Protective factors are the experiences that protect or buffer us from the adverse effects of stress, and promote resilience. The more access we have to these protective factors during hard times, the more resilient we're likely to be.

- Effective, quality caregiving
 - Close relationships with capable adults
 - Close friends or romantic partners
 - Intelligence and problem solving skills
- 
- Self-control, emotion regulation, planfulness
 - Motivation to succeed
 - Faith, hope, belief in meaning in life
 - Effective schools
 - Effective neighborhoods and communities

Masten, 2014

Resilience Myths

- **Myth:** Resilience is a characteristic some people have and other people don't.
- **Truth:** **Resilience is not a characteristic or trait.** Resilience is something we can all experience.
- **Myth:** Your ability to be resilient is consistent across your life.
- **Truth:** **Resilience fluctuates over time**, depending on the level of adversity you are experiencing, and on your ability to access protective factors in your life.
- **Myth:** If you're resilient during one kind of hardship, you should be resilient during all kinds of hardships.
- **Truth:** Though you may be resilient in many situations, **resilience during one experience does not guarantee you'll always be resilient to every type of experience.**
- **Myth:** Resilience only happens when you face extreme adversity.
- **Truth:** **Resilience is built, strengthened, shaped and expressed over time through all kinds of experiences** - the typical ups and downs of life, and extreme adversity.

What is resilience?

Fostering the 'ordinary magic' of resilience

How can adults help?

There are many ways adults can promote resilience in young children. Adults can:

- **Connect, listen, express care.**
- Provide **structured and predictable environments.**
- Help children solve problems without taking over.
- **Keep a positive outlook.**
- Actively teach and **model healthy coping strategies.**



How do these actions promote resilience?

When adults:

Connect, listen, express care

Provide predictable rules & structure

Help solve problems without taking over

Keep a positive outlook

Model healthy coping strategies

Children learn:

My needs matter, and adults are here to help me when I feel upset.

I know the rules and what to expect, and that makes me more confident.

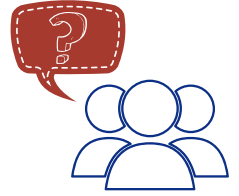
I am smart and can solve problems, and adults help me when I'm stuck.

I believe there is purpose in life, and good things can happen.

I can name and tame my emotions and control my behaviors.

Trauma & Resilience

Discussion Questions



- 1** Pretend you've just met someone who doesn't know about the concept of trauma. In your own words, how would you explain the concept of trauma to them?
- 2** Pretend you've just met someone who doesn't know about the concept of resilience. In your own words, how would you explain the concept of resilience to them?
- 3** What does trauma "look like"? How does it show up in a person's emotions or behaviors? What are common indicators that a person has experienced something traumatic?
- 4** Describe a situation when you, or someone you know, has demonstrated resilience. What did you observe?
- 5** In your experience, what does your "fight, flight, or freeze" response feel like in the moment (e.g., sweating, heart racing, yelling, shutting down)? How might your response be similar or different from others' responses? Why?
- 6** What are common characteristics or experiences that promote resilience?
- 7** What situations during your day are likely to activate your stress response system (e.g. fight, flight, freeze)? What situations are likely to trigger a stress response in children you care for?
- 8** What are some common challenging behaviors you see in children that might be due to experiences of trauma?
- 9** What are some primary ways you can promote resilience in yourself, your colleagues, and the children and families you work with?

Watch the videos & download the complete Resilience Toolkit!
DeveloPlayLLC.com/toolkit

Strategies for Acting Out Behaviors

How do you help them?

What does acting out look like?

Hyperactivity	Hands clasped in fists
Kicking	Clawing at air
Screaming	Gasping for breath
Spitting	Verbal aggression
Pushing	Oppositional behavior
Throwing	Limit testing
"Puffing up"	



What purpose is the acting out response serving?

- What their bodies are saying: **"I'm threatened!" "This is overwhelming!" "Help me!"**
- An acting out or "fight" response is an **instinctual reaction to sensing a threat** that releases hormones in the body to prepare to do battle and triumph over the "hostile entity."
- Children may have **learned fight reactions by observing them** in other people and as a result, may feel their only choices are to be "big and powerful" or "vulnerable" to threat.
- In order **to try to stay safe**, children may choose to act "big and powerful" because it is more adaptive to look angry, big and scary than scared, vulnerable and powerless.

What should you do in the moment?

- Offer **connection before correction**.
- Stay present and calm in your stance, body language, tone of voice, and take deep breaths.
- Help them **focus on their breathing**.
- **Create a safe space** and limit numbers of adults and children involved to lessen sense of threat.
- Provide adequate personal space. Be near, but leave space, and be aware of escape routes.
- Keep verbal interactions brief but respectful using **clear, simple, direct language**.
- **Identify and name child's thoughts and feelings**.
- Explain to other children that "Joey was having a big feeling and teachers helped him calm down and be safe."

“What should you say?”

I'm here to help you. Your body is having big feelings. I can help.

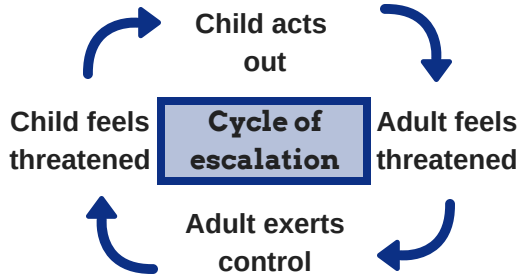
It's OK to be angry, but I won't let you hit. We need to keep everyone safe.

Why don't we take some deep breaths together? Smell the flowers, blow out the candle.

There's a lot of toys out. I bet you're feeling overwhelmed. Let's work together to clean up the toys.

How are you reacting?

- **Fear! Threat! Red Alert!** Your stress response system may interpret child's behavior as threat.



In the moment



Take a breath



Power down



Be present

- **"Powering up"** with thoughts like "Oh no you didn't!" or "I'm the boss here" may instigate a power struggle with the child.
- **Withdrawing or ignoring** and leaving the child alone to cope with their overwhelming feelings and behaviors when they were trying to ask for help, (even though not in an appropriate way) teaches them that "adults can't help me."

How can you help prevent acting out behaviors?

Observe & Learn

- Track when behavior occurs and potential patterns
- Be **aware of potential triggers**
- Observe child's emotional state
- Learn how child's body best releases emotional energy
- Use incidents to process what happened

Connect & Communicate

- Check in often - verbally, nonverbally, with or without touch
- **Offer connection** prior to potentially triggering experiences
- Praise and acknowledge good behaviors
- Talk with children about incidents and how to do better next time

Change the Environment

- Minimize environmental triggers
- Reduce potential weapons
- Create calm down area
- Add visual or auditory **cues for transitions**
- Provide physical ways to help talk about emotions

What does progress look like?



Pro tip: Celebrate the baby steps!

- Instead of immediate fight behaviors, child may use powerful language, scream, or threaten others.
- Child may approach you and provide a short window of time in which to read their cues.
- Child might engage with others who are showing the same fight behaviors and try to tell them the rules.

For more resources: DeveloPlayLLC.com/toolkit

Acting Out: How do you help them?

Discussion Questions



- 1** Is this behavior one of your hot buttons? What is your internal response to this behavior? What do you notice or feel happening in your body? What thoughts come to mind?
- 2** How have you responded to these behaviors in the past? How did it work? What have you been taught is the “right way” to handle them?
- 3** Is the child acting out in fight, flight, or freeze? How can this behavior be adaptive – how may it have kept this child safe in other situations?
- 4** As adults we use acting out behaviors. Yes, even adults have tantrums! What are some reasons adults might use these behaviors, and what are they trying to communicate?
- 5** What, as an adult, do you need from others when you are acting out? How do we as adults learn to control the impulse to act out?
- 6** What did you notice about Tracy’s body language, tone of voice, and approach that escalated the situation (as we approached the red alert)? What did she change after she saw Jenna act out in response?
- 7** How did Jenna react when Tracy changed to a more preventative approach by warning Jenna ahead of time about the upcoming transition? What did you notice? What could Tracy have done differently? What are other approaches you might try?
- 8** Sometimes we think it is hard to take the extra time to connect this way with students. What is the benefit of taking the couple extra moments to connect with children?
- 9** Why might transitions be a trauma trigger for children? What are other ways you can prepare children for transitions?

Watch the video & download the complete Resilience Toolkit!
DeveloPlayLLC.com/toolkit

Strategies for Shutting Down Behaviors

How do you help them?

What does shutting down look like?

Watchfulness	Whining
Seeming numb	Suppressing feelings
Holding breath	Overly compliant
Unable to move	Shutting down emotionally
Looking dazed	Disconnected from physical senses
Daydreaming	



What purpose is the shutting down response serving?

- What their bodies are saying: **"I'm utterly helpless, I can't run or fight and there's no one to rescue me." "I am a loser because I let them do that to me."**
- A shutting down response is an **instinctual reaction to sensing a threat** that results in a state of **dissociation** due to feeling overwhelmed and helpless.
- Dissociation is the separation of the child's mind and their behavior in a way that lessens the full experience of distress and emotions.
- Infants who experience trauma may have over-developed this shutting down response, because it is the only response available during that phase of development.

What should you do in the moment?

- **Assess** if they are in a shut down state by asking "What are you feeling inside your body right now?" If they can't feel their body, they may be dissociating.
- **Invite them to talk about their surroundings.**
- **Do a grounding activity.** Name 5 things they see, hear and feel; count how many blue items they can see; name animals beginning with the first 5 letters of the alphabet.
- **Reconnect them to physical sensations** through calming smells, a cold water compress, ice cubes or cold bottle behind the knees, get up and move around.
- **Take it slow.** Avoid rushing children back into intense activity.

“What should you say?”

It seems like you needed some time to be alone and just shut everything else out.

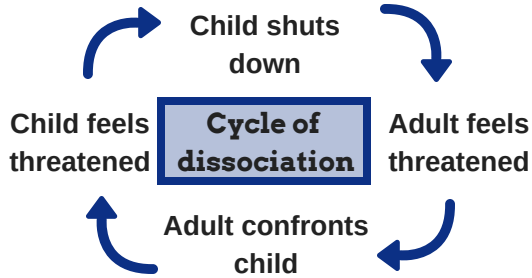
Tell me where you are. What are you doing right this minute?

Do you feel more relaxed or tense right now? Where in your body is it the most tight or most relaxed?

I'm right here, take the time you need.

How are you reacting?

- **Challenge! Frustration! Obstinace!** You may interpret child's behavior as threat to authority.



- **Expecting them to immediately respond** to directions or resume an activity when they are shut down.
- **Blaming them** for missing directions or cues "They are never listening. They are lazy and unmotivated. They are daydreaming again."



In the moment



Take a breath



Power down



Be present

How can you help prevent the shutting down behaviors?

Observe & Learn

- **Be observant** - these children's responses often go unnoticed
- Understand dissociation, learn to recognize signs
- Identify potential triggers to dissociation
- Be aware of how children express emotional states

Connect & Communicate

- Check in often - verbally, nonverbally, with or without touch
- **Offer connection** prior to potentially triggering experiences
- Praise and acknowledge good behaviors
- Talk with children about incidents and how to do better next time

Change the Environment

- Enhance safety
- Minimize environmental triggers
- Create an escape area
- Add visual or auditory cues for transitions
- Provide **physical ways to help reengage** when dissociation occurs

What does progress look like?



Pro tip: Celebrate the baby steps!

- Instead of immediately shutting down, they might call out or engage in fight or flight behaviors. This is progress because they are learning to express emotions outwardly instead of shutting down.
- They may look to you or say your name before they shut down.
- They start to recover more quickly from their dissociative state.

Shutting Down: How do you help them?

Discussion Questions



- 1** Is this behavior one of your hot buttons? What is your internal response to this behavior? What do you notice or feel happening in your body? What thoughts come to mind?
- 2** How have you responded to these behaviors in the past? How did it work? What have you been taught is the “right way” to handle them?
- 3** Is the child acting out in fight, flight, or freeze? How can this behavior be adaptive – how may it have kept this child safe in other situations?
- 4** If you have ever shut down as an adult, what responses from others have helped you recover in the moment?
- 5** What are some events or activities you have seen cause children to shut down? How do their bodies and behaviors express feeling shut down?
- 6** What did you notice about Tracy’s body language, tone of voice, and approach that escalated the situation (as we approached the red alert)? What did she change after she saw Jenna shut down in response?
- 7** How did Jenna react when Tracy changed to a more preventative approach of talking with all the children about the challenge of writing their names? What did you notice? What could Tracy have done differently? What are other approaches you might try?
- 8** What are some things Tracy said to address Jenna's feelings of frustration? What other words or phrases might have worked to help Jenna?
- 9** In this scenario, asking Jenna to write her name caused her to shut down. Why might this be a trauma trigger for her? What may have happened in her past that would lead to this?

Watch the video & download the complete Resilience Toolkit!
DeveloPlayLLC.com/toolkit

Strategies for Defiant Behaviors

How do you help them?

What does defiance look like?

Arguing	Refusal to follow rules
Easily losing temper	Acting to annoy others
Repeated temper tantrums	Unwilling to compromise
Blaming others	Resistant to negotiating
Blatant hostility	Blatant disobedience
Willingly destroys friendships	Passive non-compliance



What purpose is the defiance response serving?

- What their bodies are saying: **"I'm threatened because I'm not in control!"** **"Being in control is the only way I can protect myself!"** **"What did you say? I wasn't really listening."**
- It is more adaptive to look mad than scared or powerless. Defiant responses may indicate:
FIGHT - "I need to be in control! You aren't the boss of me!"
FLIGHT - "I'm dissociated right now and didn't hear what you said, but if I show that, I might look dumb, so I'll show mad instead."
FREEZE - "I'm stuck, I can't do anything because my body is frozen in fear."

What should you do in the moment?

- Offer **connection before correction**.
- **Stay present and calm** in stance, body language, tone of voice, and take deep breaths.
- Use short statements.
- **Limit the number of adults involved** as additional people can increase sense of threat.
- Be aware that defiant behaviors are often precursors to more escalated behaviors. Staying calm is essential to defusing the situation.
- **Offer choices** if possible as a way to "save face" for the child.
- **Give them time** to think, calm, and process a direction or request.
- Identify child's wants and feelings, and offer help.

“What should you say?”

When I gave you that direction, it made your body feel big.

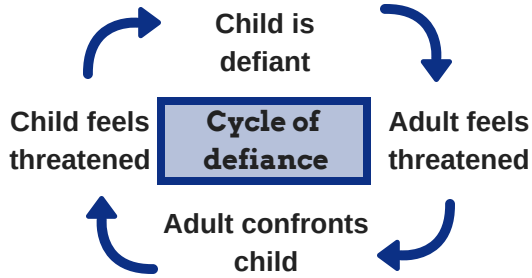
I was thinking you wanted me to help you, but you were thinking you wanted to do it by yourself.

Would you prefer ____ or ____? You can choose.

Why don't we take some deep breaths together? Smell the flowers, blow out the candle.

How are you reacting?

- **Fear! Threat! Red Alert!** You may interpret child's behavior as threat.



- **"Powering up"** with thoughts like "Oh no you didn't!" or "I'm the boss here" may instigate a power struggle with the child.
- **Withdrawing or ignoring** by turning or walking away tells children they can get their way if they stay big and scary, even if it doesn't feel good.



In the moment



Take a breath



Power down



Be present

How can you help prevent defiant behaviors?

Observe & Learn

- **Be aware of potential triggers**
- Track when behavior occurs and potential patterns
- Observe child's emotional state
- Use incidents to process what happened

Connect & Communicate

- Check in often - verbally, nonverbally, with or without touch
- Offer connection prior to potentially triggering experiences
- **Model alternative ways of coping** with difficult things other than being defiant
- Praise and acknowledge good behaviors

Change the Environment

- Enhance safety
- Minimize environmental triggers
- Create a calm down area
- Add visual or auditory cues for transitions
- **Offer help** as they learn to do things independently

What does progress look like?

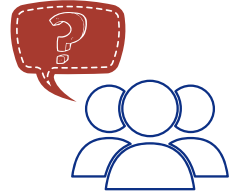


Pro tip: Celebrate the baby steps!

- They might shut down or get quiet instead of yelling or arguing.
- Show "no, then yes" by telling you no, calming down, and then complying with request, possibly while stomping feet or whining.
- They may become more consistently compliant when doing difficult things. Tell them you appreciate them staying calm, even when it's hard!

Defiance: How do you help them?

Discussion Questions



- 1** Is this behavior one of your hot buttons? What is your internal response to this behavior? What do you notice or feel happening in your body? What thoughts come to mind?
- 2** How have you responded to these behaviors in the past? How did it work? What have you been taught is the “right way” to handle them?
- 3** Is the child acting out in fight, flight, or freeze? How can this behavior be adaptive – how may it have kept this child safe in other situations?
- 4** As adults we can be defiant too. What is your way of showing defiance? What feeling do you associate with this behavior?
- 5** What, as an adult, do you need from others when you are feeling defiant? What is helpful for others to do when you are in this state? What *isn't* helpful?
- 6** What did you notice about Tracy's body language, tone of voice, and approach that escalated the situation (as we approached the red alert)? What did she change after she saw Jenna's defiance?
- 7** How did Jenna react when Tracy changed to a more preventative approach by connecting with Jenna through touching her hands, prior to giving the directions? What did you notice? What could Tracy have done differently? What are other approaches you might try?
- 8** What are some things Tracy said to address Jenna's feelings of defiance? What other words or phrases might have worked to help Jenna?
- 9** Why might a history of food insecurity increase anxiety around transitions to mealtimes? What are other ways you can help children with food insecurity issues approach mealtimes?

Watch the video & download the complete Resilience Toolkit!
DeveloPlayLLC.com/toolkit

How do you help them?

Roleplay Scenarios

Suggested Directions for Use

- Break into small groups and assign one roleplay scenario to each group.
- Have each group identify and assign roles (child, adult, peers) and act out the scenario using different strategies to address the challenging behaviors. Don't just talk about what you'd say - actually act it out!
- Be sure to swap roles so everyone gets a chance to play different roles.
- Reflect and discuss: What did it feel like to be in your role? If you were the child, was the adult able to help you? If you were the adult, did you feel like you helped the child? Why or why not? If you were a peer, or observing, what did you notice? If you could do it over again, how would you have approached this differently knowing what you know now?
- If your group is adventurous, have them act out their roleplays in front of the large group!



Dolores, 18 months, plays with a pop-up toy for about 5 minutes, then looks at a book for several minutes. When done with the book, she looks around the room, sees bare tables with no chairs around them, one pile of books, a climbing mat with 6 toddlers piled on it, and 3 pop-up toys. She knocks over the pile of books, climbs on top of the table for a moment, then goes to the door to the hallway. She sticks her head over the gate and yells loudly down the hall then begins to kick the gate.



Matthew and Jessica, 26 and 28 months, are playing house in the dramatic play area. Matthew is pretending to talk to Mommy on a toy phone. He puts the phone down on a table and walks to the window. After a few moments of looking outside, he returns to the table and sees Jessica playing with the phone. He screams, "Mine!" and tries to pull the phone from Jessica. She won't let go and a struggle ensues. Matthew hits Jessica and they both fall to the ground tugging on the phone.



Sevon, a 3-year-old, hits the teacher and screams "No!" when told it is time to clean up. He then pushes a child who is nearby. The child falls and hits their shoulder on the floor and begins to cry. Then upon seeing the child cry, Sevon runs out of the room and heads towards the entry door as if to leave the building.



Mohamed, 4 years old, "smarts off" to his teacher and the entire class laughs. Then Mohamed begins to call his teacher [insert swear word here]. When ignored, he begins to take off his clothes and throw them around the room.

How do you help them? Roleplay Scenarios

5

Julie, age 6, is sitting down to eat lunch. A peer takes some food off her plate and she screams, "That's mine! That's mine! That's mine!" and raises her closed fist as if to punch her peer.

6

Rudy, who is 4 years old, refuses to sit down at the beginning of story time. The teacher's assistant picks Rudy up and puts him in her lap but he climbs off and begins to wander around the room, knocking toys off shelves, tipping chairs, and then begins to run and giggle.

7

The preschool children are sitting at small tables working on puzzles, beads, and coloring. Ms. Chrissy, the teacher, notices that every day during this time, Alex is noncompliant, whines, and throws his play materials and then shuts down and refuses to talk or interact until the rest of the children have finished and transitioned to the next activity. Today, he has climbed under the table and refuses to come out.

8

Nevaeh, age 8, is usually quiet and mild mannered and well-liked by her peers. However, Nevaeh has difficulty staying focused during large-group activities. Today, Navaeh tries to talk to her neighbor while pulling items off her neighbor's desk. Then she takes her shoes off and lays on the floor looking around, humming loudly.

9

Lillian is a four-year-old girl who exhibits persistent challenging behavior. Ms. LaTasha has talked with Lillian's mother and learned that Lillian is aggressive at home when she must share toys with siblings and cousins. Today, Lillian scratches, bites, hits, and kicks her friend when he has a toy that she wants. When the friend refuses to share the toy, Lillian runs to a nearby wall and kicks it, then plops down in anger and bangs her head on the floor.